

SOME OBJECTIVES IN A COLLEGIATE TRAINING ¹

THIS is a day of gladness to you. And I desire to be among those who extend sincere congratulations. You deserve them. One long lap in your journey through life is finished, and you are eager to commence another lap. You are disposed to view this new lap as holding the real purpose of your existence. The struggle for the Bachelor's degree or the coveted diploma was a mere incident. Now you are impatient to go forth into a genuine struggle—one in which you fondly expect to achieve worth-while things. I admire your aim, purpose and spirit. And I shall not long detain you; but as I've already preceded you some years in this longer lap, perhaps you'll be willing to lend ear to the recital of a few wishes for you, and which you may sooner or later let occupy your thought.

Having completed your activities here in the Institute you have a very sure foundation upon which to build, and it is at this point that I desire to obtrude my thoughts. You have doubtless made plans for your future work, but when that work is in progress and at moments when you may have grown weary in your endeavors, there may be found recreation and profit in the consideration of other subjects. You should welcome the study of these other and newer things.

All of us love our country. We resent the suspicion that it may be otherwise, for we've loudly proclaimed that for country we are ready—yes, willing—perfectly willing—to

¹ Address delivered by Edgar Fahs Smith, formerly Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, at the eighth commencement convocation of the Rice Institute, held Monday morning, June 4, 1923, at nine o'clock.

Objectives in a Collegiate Training 197

die! Have we seriously studied the problem? We are proud of our country, but what really is it of which we are so proud and for which we are prepared to make such heroic sacrifices? Is it not, in fact, the government of our land? So it seems to me, and then I advance and ask "do I know my government in its proud and noble laws?" Is it not just there that you, stepping forth into the real world, might pause and interrogate for yourselves as I have so frequently done for myself,—what does our Constitution—the Constitution of the United States—mean to you and to your neighbor? We all are now charged with a part in the administration and maintenance of our fundamental laws. And this being true, let me read the Preamble of our national Constitution:

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America."

Is it not a beautiful and inspiring paragraph? Consider its justness and soundness. All that follows the Preamble has for its object the promotion of the ideas set forth in this Preamble. And this remarkable instrument was the product of the best thought of wise men after four months of daily consideration. The whole instrument comprises but four thousand words and may be read in thirty minutes. Turn to the life stories of the framers of the Constitution. There will be found evidences of unselfish spirits who labored not for self but for you and for me—for all who call or may call themselves Americans.

Our fathers were not obsessed with the idea of creating a perfect government. They did not regard themselves as

198 Objectives in a Collegiate Training

able to create a panacea for all human ills. They knew the frailties of man and determined not to create a perfect government, but to form a more perfect Union. They did not attempt a Utopia, but desired only to establish justice. They did not define justice, knowing it to be a relative term. They did not attempt to create absolute peace among the citizens of this Republic, but were content to insure domestic tranquility. They did not desire to guarantee to every individual a life of ease, or that our country should be a rendezvous for the oppressed of the world, but that the Constitution might continue through the ages to promote the general welfare.

A great American in writing of the framers of our Constitution and the laws of our Country, said: "They were pillars in the temple of liberty, and now that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us, but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason—cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason—must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. Let these materials be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the Constitution and laws."

Should we not ponder upon all this and things similar in those moments when weary of our chief occupations in life? Ideals are worth the thought of educated men and women. They are not glittering generalities. And, in spite of its many practical features, it should always be remembered that the Constitution of the United States is, after all, an instrument representing an ideal.

This great state in which we are impresses one deeply. You have almost everything desirable. As a chemist I

Objectives in a Collegiate Training 199

marvel at its natural resources in minerals, oil, timber, the fertility of its soil and numerous other dispositions of nature. In the leisure you may have from your main occupation in life it will prove interesting and profitable to study these material subjects. If you are the least chemically inclined they will command your attention. That science, known as chemistry, has seemed so distant from us as individuals. Many of us have viewed it as something strange and occult, but in fact, it touches everyone of us—every man, woman and child, as no other science touches us. Even the great John Adams, second President of the United States, was moved on hearing of the establishment of a chair of chemistry in Harvard, to write the new professor of the subject:

"I rejoice that such a professorship is established. . . . I am afraid to express my wild ideas on this subject. We are all chymists from our cradles. All mankind are chymists from their cradles to their graves. The material Universe is a chymical experiment. . . . How shall we discover the smallest particles of matter in the Universe. When and how shall we discover the original causes of the mysterious diversity of odours and flavours; consider the odour of the Apple, the Quince, the Lemon, the Orange, the Strawberry, the Raspberry, the Pine Apple, the Grape, the Roses, the Blossoms, the Lillies, etc., etc. What are they?"

And then the distinguished statesman added:

"Give us the best possible bread, butter and cheese, wine, beer, and cider, houses, ships, and steamboats, gardens, orchards, fields, not to mention clothiers and cooks."

And in the century which has elapsed since Mr. Adams uttered these expressed wishes, chemistry has practically given positive evidence of its powers in the directions he indicated. For no science is so intimately connected with

200 Objectives in a Collegiate Training

the pursuits of man as chemistry. It embraces the whole range of created matter. In its researches it comprehends all substances, animate or inanimate; it explains their elementary principles, it unfolds their combinations, it traces their affinities, it ascertains the result of new associations, new combinations. In every employment we feel its influence or want its aid. It is the human science. And what a vast field lies before it here in this grand state.

Do not forget that this science which has done and will continue to do so much with natural resources, has also contributed mightily to the subjugation of subtle and death-dealing diseases. The world was astounded at the forces it marshalled in the period of the World War. The consummate skill with which American chemists met the problems of self-preservation and protection was the wonder of the world. My enthusiasm for the science would enable me to unfold even more conquests to you, but I refrain. Chemistry is, I repeat, the *human* science. These paragraphs are just another suggestion to you. Texas and chemistry is no visionary subject. It is full of possibilities.

But let me turn another leaf in this sketchy address. At my elbow lay, while penning these lines, a large bulky quarto volume, bearing the date 1818—therefore, just one hundred and five years old. It carries the euphonious title "Statistical Annals." This almost deters one from making any further acquaintance with it, and you may query why any mention is made of it on such an occasion as this. What connection can it possibly have with these delightful exercises? It is a very remarkable publication. It was prepared to enlighten Americans upon what had occurred in the first quarter of a century in the life of this glorious republic. And I am going to add that I have found it a fascinating book! The fact is I have mulled it over, again and again.

Objectives in a Collegiate Training 201

It is delightfully written, if that is at all possible with statistics; but on its pages may be found information which frankly thrills one having the slightest scintilla of love for country in his heart. Just hear this. It relates to the feeling of foreign countries in regard to the emigration of their people to America :

"It is a mistake to suppose that they (the foreign countries) so much dread the loss of their subjects, on account of the number who are disposed to emigrate. They are more alarmed, on account of the general diffusion of a knowledge of their arts and manufactures, amongst a people of so much enterprise and industry as the inhabitants of the United States."

Readable as is this volume, replete as it is with vital data regarding the infancy of the republic, and worthy as it is as an absorbing study for every intelligent man and woman, my purpose in directing your attention to it was of another nature. This is the book which falling for review into the hands of Sydney Smith—an English divine and the wittiest man of his day, caused him to burst forth in this language—probably in irritation :

"In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?"

To which James Russell Lowell later replied :

"Surely never was a young nation setting forth jauntily to seek his fortune so dumbfounded as Brother Jonathan when John Bull cried gruffly from the woodside—"Stand and deliver a national literature!" After fumbling in his pockets, he was obliged to confess that he hadn't one about him at the moment, but vowed that he had left a first-rate one at home which he would have fetched away—only it was so everlastingly heavy!"

Wasn't that a perfectly splendid answer? What would

202 Objectives in a Collegiate Training

the great and renowned Sydney say about us to-day in the literary way? But suppose the old Bay State should direct at you the question—what has Texas done for literature? Are you prepared with a Lowell rejoinder?

The bolt of Sydney Smith, when it became known to me, incensed me deeply; so, long ago, I instituted a search into early Americana with the result that I could acclaim all that Lowell wrote.

Apropos, let me slip in this incident of a somewhat similar misunderstanding on the other side of the English Channel:

English-speaking Parisians draw the line at the British high-brow author, but are eager to make the acquaintance of Dickens and Kipling. They actually harbour the fond delusion that these two writers are of the same period, and that the author of *Pickwick Papers* is still living. Indeed, one cultured lady, who is president of a reading circle, recently expressed the hope that "Monsieur Dickens might be induced to visit France," and his address straightway was sought in *Who's Who*. Only upon a well informed member of the circle explaining why the address could not be furnished, did she give up hope. Overcome by confusion the president swore everyone present to secrecy. Paris, however, dearly loving a joke, all the town soon was in a position to discuss the entertaining incident down to the minutest detail.

At this point permit me to add that each one of us owes it to country and self to be informed upon the activities of our land. My humble effort to acquire a knowledge of American literature developed a real love for the things which came to me. Frankly, I was amazed. I'd had some acquaintance with American literature; an acquaintance with the high points, but volumes might be written upon the less striking contributions, for they, in great measure, reflect the

Objectives in a Collegiate Training 203

life and spirit of our people. The older folks in this audience will recall that genuinely beautiful, heart-touching ballad—"Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt." For years it was all the vogue. And I still remember how I pleaded with a favorite aunt to sing it to me again and again, young as I was, little thinking that in time it would be my privilege to meet him who composed the ballad—I refer to Thomas Dunn English—striking character and figure, gifted in a remarkable degree with the power of chaste linguistic expression. In his remarks to a group of college men he was disposed to depreciate his homely verse, forgetting as it appeared to many that:

'Tis not the greatest singer
Who tries the loftiest themes,
He is the true joy bringer
Who tells his simplest dreams.
He is the greatest poet
Who will renounce all art,
And take his heart and show it
To every other heart.

This reference to Thomas Dunn English has suggested another thought. There are outstanding figures among men and there always have been. Asked to name the greatest and best biographical work your immediate answer would be Boswell's Johnson. The literary world would at once approve. But every life has something to offer—every biographical sketch contains points deserving thought—the thought particularly of persons like us who have travelled some distance on the educational road. It was Thomas Carlyle who wrote:

"Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here."

And why should they not be known to us? Not only the

204 Objectives in a Collegiate Training

Doctor Johnsons and Doctor Franklins, but the Sam Houstons as well, furnish in their lives stories of telling value. Not long ago chance threw me, on a train, into the company of a young college fellow whom I had observed as intensely interested in a book. When our acquaintance was made I was quick to observe the nature of the book which held his attention, and lo! it was the biography of a business man! I later read that book and found it perfectly wonderful—the story of one who had struggled and achieved. These great makers of universal history are decidedly worthy of careful consideration. We may well strive to emulate them.

But I must stop. You have grasped my thought. There's a purpose in it. You have completed a lap in your life course. You have under you an educational foundation. You are chafing under an invisible restraint. I am most desirous to have you try your wings, but as I leave you there arises the hope that upon your present educational foundation you will place additional acquirements; in short, that you will broaden your educational horizon by roaming into the fields of government and law, into those of science, into those of literature, into those of art, etc. Your effort should be to become *thinking* and truly educated men and women. My suggestions, superficially presented, may extend no farther than "hobbies"—but even so, they carry with them only that which is good and uplifting. On a certain occasion that distinguished physician—preëminently great in the field of neurology—Weir Mitchell, was asked how he came to write *Hugh Wynne*, *The Red City*, and other entertaining historical works of fiction, as well as several delightful poems. He answered that every educated person should have in his brain playgrounds to which he might turn when exhausted by his principal vocation.

Objectives in a Collegiate Training 205

There he would find recreation, profit and pleasure. I can heartily commend such "play-grounds" to you. I've followed the eminent physician's advice and rejoice in my experiences.

Again, I say I must conclude and not further burden you. You have my sincerest wishes for every possible good on the voyage before you. May success attend every one of you.

Each moss,
Each shell, each crawling insect, holds a rank
Important in the plan of Him who framed
The scale of Being!

EDGAR FAHS SMITH.